

Lawmakers face critical budget issues, Folsom says

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DAVID WHITE

Birmingham News staff writer

Dealing with expected drops in state government spending next year will be the major problem lawmakers will face in this year's regular session of the Legislature, Lt. Gov. Jim Folsom Jr. said Wednesday.

"We're facing pretty much of a critical situation," Folsom said at the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama's annual meeting, held at The Wynfrey Hotel in Hoover.

"That is sort of how I see it shaping up: budgets, budgets, budgets," he said.

"We've got \$800 million we've got to come up with, or cut," said Folsom, who presides over debate in the state Senate.

The regular session starts Feb. 5 and could last through May 19.

Last week, Legislative Fiscal Office director Joyce Bigbee told lawmakers that spending from the Education Trust Fund for public schools and colleges could drop by \$573.9 million, or 8.5 percent, from this year to the 2009 fiscal year, which starts Oct. 1.

She said she expects spending from the trust fund, the main source of state tax dollars for education, to total \$6.729 billion this year. She forecast the total amount of money available to spend next year to be \$6.155 billion.

Bigbee also said she expected the General Fund to spend \$1.844 billion this year and to have \$1.611 billion to spend next year, a cut of \$232.3 million, or 12.6 percent. The General Fund supports state agencies over Medicaid, prisons, public safety and other areas.

Bigbee's estimates assumed lawmakers would not raise taxes or fees.

Gov. Bob Riley joined Folsom and others who spoke at PARCA's annual meeting.

Riley has said he intends to reveal on Feb. 5 his proposed state budgets for 2009, but he didn't offer many sneak peeks in his speech.

He did say, however, that he wants next year's education budget to preserve four programs he says are helping public school students learn more. "We are leading the nation in innovation in education. We can't cut it back," Riley said in his speech.

In an interview later, Riley said he wants to boost spending for the programs next year by:

\$20 million, from \$10 million this year to \$30 million next year, to provide pre-kindergarten classes for thousands more 4-year-olds.

About \$12 million, from \$64.4 million to about \$76.4 million, for the reading initiative, which teaches teachers how to better instruct students in reading.

About \$10 million, from \$35.8 million to about \$45.8 million, for a program that teaches teachers how to better instruct students in math and science.

About \$9 million, from \$20.3 million to about \$29.3 million, to expand distance learning to more high schools. The program lets teachers use video conferencing to teach advanced courses to students in other schools.

Riley said he wants to trim other education spending next year to help ensure those programs get more money.

"If we're going to invest in a program, that program needs to work," Riley said in his speech. "Just because you've always funded a program doesn't necessarily mean it's a good program."

"We're going to do what we have to do to make sure that we fund programs that work," he said.

Riley didn't specify the education programs he plans to ask lawmakers to cut.

E-mail: dwhite@bhamnews.com